Website Optimisation for beginners

(Or Seven Steps to Website Heaven)

by Bob Francis

Web optimisation is the process or rather series of processes that when carried out well will ensure that your site is seen by the people who need to see it -your customers. Many businesses will seek out companies who are experienced in this area to optimise their site. Most charge very large amounts of money to get your site promoted in the rankings with ongoing retainers to keep you there. Yet most of the techniques and processes used are relatively simple to carry out and given the right level of commitment, an ongoing 'maintenance' programme will keep your site there. This paper is all about how you can get your site to the top of the search engine rankings and stay there.

The web is continually changing and new ideas such as blogging and social networking and other so called Web 2.0 techniques are constantly being introduced. (For those of us who are perhaps not aware Web 2.0 is NOT the next version of the internet but rather a collection of tools and techniques that are now being used on the Internet, two of which I have mentioned above.) Companies such as Google, MSN, Yahoo and others are always looking for ways to increase revenue. And the way they search for websites and index them in their own databases changes frequently. This means that if you do not keep on top of maintaining the position of your website, you will decline in the rankings.

We will describe here the seven main steps that you should consider in order to optimise your website. However before we start, do you know how many visitors you get to your website now? No? Well this is an important initial step as you will not be able to see the effect of your optimisation strategy and will not be able to adjust your programme over time as you will not know what works. Therefore you need to be able to track not only visitors to the site but indeed visitors to each page, how long they stay there and to measure your bounce rate. This can be very simply done using Google Analytics. They

will produce some code that you can cut and paste into each page of your website and from then on you will be able to receive regular reports on visitor numbers and more besides. More information on Google Analytics can be found at www.google.co.uk/services, where you will also find many other useful tools to help you.

So now to the seven steps:

Step 1.   Keywords

Keywords are the words used by customers to search for a product or service on the internet. You will need to ask yourself what customers look for when they want to buy our product. What do they search for? Many times this is not just a single word but often a phrase or series of words.

For instance you may be a publican trying to bring in additional trade. You are based in Sussex so you may think your key words may be "pubs in Sussex." This is quite adequate and you will appear in a search engine listing amongst the thousands of other pubs in Sussex. However you may want to attract a particular type of customers as you serve good quality food and you are a gastropub. Therefore you may want to consider "gastropubs in Sussex" as better keywords for your purposes and has the benefit of being highly targeted. This will mean that you will come higher in a smaller group in the search engine listings.

A thorough keyword search of types of words and phrases that suit your business and that your customers use, will allow you to get on the first rung of the optimisation ladder. To help you a free e-book on keyword research can be obtained from the following site http://learn.wordtracker.com/ebooks/keyword-research-guide. All major search engines offer (usually) free keyword statistics to allow you to understand the most popular words or phrases used when searching for your products or services. Through www.overture.com statistics for a number of search engines can be obtained. However you should note that 87% of all searches use Google as the search engine. There are also sites and software downloads (many of them are freeware) that will help you choose keywords and

provide alternatives. One such site is Good Words from Softnik Technologies ©
which is available at http://www.goodkeywords.com/products/gkw/.

When doing the research on key words remember that not all of us are typists.
Sometimes we make mistakes with spelling or typing and this gets through to the
search engine. Normally there will be a 'Document not found' message or Google
in particular will return a 'Did You mean' alternative message. By using some
misspellings as your keywords you will be found and this will maximise your
chances of a new customer. Typical examples might be *slaes* not sales or *startegy*
not strategy.

Before we leave this step however a word or two about how many keywords you
should have. Opinion among professionals varies but it is considered that up to
about 10 or so keywords or phrases would be sufficient for most purposes. If you
can only come up with 7 or 8, do not worry, this will be fine as long as you use
those words in your copy (text) on the site.

Step 2.   Title tags and meta tags

When you visit a website have you ever wondered how they get the words at the
top of the title page and how it changes for each page? The answer is title tags.
These are part of meta tags and are "behind the page" words or phrases designed
to describe the page and content for search engines and web browsers.

When you first get a website the designer will normally put some if not all of this
in for you. But if you have access to the content through a Content Management
System (CMS) you can simply do it yourself. There is no need for coding as most
accept plain English.

Search engines seek out content. However, most people will put their company
name as the title tag. Unless you are an extremely well known business such as
Coca Cola you will not be found as not many will search for you by name. If you
need to include your name put it at the end of the title tag. The title tag should tell
a searcher what the website is about so if you are a 'pub in Sussex that serves

food,' enter this as the title tag. Some organisations just put a series of keywords with commas separating them as their title tag which is perfectly acceptable.

Meta tags can fundamentally be a listing of all the keyword or phrases that you have previously decided upon. However it is essential that these are also used in the copy (text) that appears on the webpage with which it is associated.

Meta Description Tag will appear immediately below the title in search engine results. So it is important that you can describe succinctly in a few words what the website or specific page is all about. This ensures that someone searching for your product and service will see readily that this is what you can provide.

Generally these areas are available if you have access to the content management system that helps you update and maintain your website. If not talk to the web designer/hoster about how you can do this.

Step 3.   Content

There are two aspects to content that will help to keep your website at or near the top of the listings. One is the relevancy of the content and the other is how frequently it is changed or added to.

The content should include as many of the keywords and phrases that you have decided to use that are relevant to that page. Repetition of key words is also acceptable but not if the copy makes no sense to the reader because the purpose of the page or website is to communicate with customers and prospects. Google in particular has strict rules concerning the use of keywords in the content. For instance it does not allow white on white keywords in other words, hidden keywords that are white on a white background.

Updating content regularly is also an important aspect of this step. Google and others register changes to sites each time they send out their crawlers or spiders. If yours is one that regularly changes, you will be noticed more and thus rise up the search engine listings. Updating content does not necessarily mean rewriting the page or site every few weeks. The addition of a news feed for instance can be

extremely helpful in raising your profile. Testimonials, case studies and white papers are also useful in this context. Getting your visitors to come back time and again because of additional useful content helps increase traffic, which is also recognised by the search engines.

Step 4.   Google ad words and landing pages
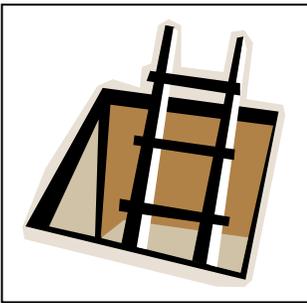
Google adwords and similar techniques have become a major tool in e-marketing. There are important benefits to be had for this type of marketing. First they can be narrowly targeted to the audience you want to attract. Second is that the budget for this type of marketing is controllable, can be limited, but can be highly successful making the cost of acquisition of customers very low. Thirdly it can help improve your rankings in the organic search area.

For the rest of this Step, I will talk about Google adwords in particular but the messages pertain to other search engines and keep in mind that 87% of all searches on the internet are done using Google.

For those not familiar with adwords these are the small pieces of text usually with a website link that appear on the right hand side of the search page. They are contextual in that the ads are served depending on the search terms used. If we take our pub in Sussex and someone searches for "pubs in Sussex" our ad will appear in the right hand side (typically) of the page because we have chosen these words as our key words and bid appropriate amounts for the key word. Where the ad appears in the column of similar ads will depend on the value that we bid for the words. The price for these words can vary from a few pence to £s depending on how popular they are. However you can limit this to a small amount per day so that your budget is not overstretched and this is an ideal method of test marketing your preferred key words. You will only have to pay for the keyword once the prospect has clicked through to your website. There is no charge for just appearing on the search page.

Many organisations bid for a number of key words for each ad and also have different ads for different subjects. They link this with landing pages on their website so that the prospect on clicking the link is taken to the relevant content. This also means that you can monitor the performance of your ads by measuring the number of unique visits made to the landing page, particularly if you use a tool such as Google analytics (see above.)

The purpose of these adwords is to promote your site and to gain rankings in the organic search section (as opposed to the 'paid for' section.) It is a very cost effective method of getting more people to your site. Google also provide help for first time users and help to improve you click through ratios for those who are more experienced.

Step 5.   Links

Search engines like links! In theory the more links the better. However this can also be a dangerous strategy. There are link farms that if you sign up will reciprocal links. They will provide you with hundreds if not thousands of links in return for adding your link to the list. Sounds a great solution doesn't it? Well Google and others do not like it as there is little or no relevance to you site, its themes and subjects.

Links however are still important. Firstly there are internal links on your site linking one page to another or navigational links. Try to avoid the 'click here' link which is much less satisfactory than using a keyword to link to the new page. Also ensure that you provide links on testimonials, case studies etc to more detailed information on the subject.

Then there are external links. There are several types of links here which we will explore. You could have links with preferred vendors, with trade organisations or with other companies that have a synergistic product or service offering. For instance a wedding cake maker could link to a photographer. Then there are business directories which again will link to your site as part of their overall package. On any newsletter you send out to your customers ensure that there are

links back to the website perhaps to a page with a more detailed explanation of the subject material. Then there is Blogging. We will go into this in more details later but blogging is a kind of on line diary or the musings of the blogger. Depending on the business you are in you can invite feedback from readers or you can just put your own thoughts down and link them to the website. This is good for discussing business trends, technical issues or any other subject that the industry or market may be interested in.

Finally there are articles or white papers. How can these be used for links, I here you say? Well there is the obvious in including links on the document itself and send that out to customers, prospects, business contacts and so on. However there are opportunities to have white papers or technical articles distributed more widely. With the astonishing explosion in growth of the internet has come an equally substantial demand for information. There are many websites out there that specialise in particular areas and are always hungry for information. With this a number of businesses have grown up, whose sole purpose is to receive and distribute articles, technical papers and press and news releases all over the world. This provides huge opportunities to have links back to your website on a large number of other sites. However you need to ensure that your content is original and interesting and be careful not to have it distributed by many companies as repetition does not necessarily improve your chances of your article being picked up. Some of these companies will distribute your article for free but others charge for their service. One such free one is http://www.fusicles.co.uk/ but you should ensure that whoever you use, whether paid or free, suits your business but better still suits your market.

Step 6.   Blogging

Web Logs or Blogs as they are more popularly known is a recent feature that also helps you to raise your profile in the search engine listings. They can be part of your site or can be hosted elsewhere with links back to your site. Recent news

items can be a form of a blog but typically a blog is occasional thoughts of the business owners or managers which can elicit feedback direct from the customer. Assuming this is interesting enough it will help maintain customer loyalty as well as increasing traffic. Regular service bulletins can also be a form of a blog.

As with any business decision, you should consider what your objectives are, what do you want to do with your blog and those you are targeting?

I could provide much more detail here but feel I could not cover the subject thoroughly enough when compared to the experts. Therefore I am happy to refer you to Better Business Blogging at www.betterbusinessblogging.com that has a very good e-course on the subject.

Step 7.   News feeds

News feeds can be a time consuming item to keep updating on your site. However this represents a change to your site which the search engines identify and this helps to improve your ranking. Any worthwhile news item, such as new staff, special contract, new product or service release, awards and events or special offers are all news that your customers will like to hear about.

RSS feeds are a special facility to allow news to be automatically served to client and prospects so you need to ensure that you news feed has the RSS facility.

There are a number of free news feed readers that can be downloaded which allows you to automatically get news updates from your favourite sites. Examples of news readers can be found at Google reader www.google.com/reader and www.feedreader.com. These can then be configured with the URL of the site you want regular updates from and whenever a new piece of news appears it is automatically served to your computer. Adding short news items on a regular basis will do wonders for your search engine positioning.

Finally there is no point in carrying out all seven steps to improve your positioning if your website does not provide your clients with value. It is

important to consider what you want your site to do and who it is targeted at.

There is no point in including for instance a whole load of technical data if the objective is to gain more clients. It will not tell me, the customer, about the benefits of using you to supply my 'widgets.' You can provide additional value by including white papers, free information, vouchers, and newsletters with the objective of bringing your customers back to your site time and again

For further information go to www.sgba.co.uk or contact me on 0845 4562394

Obtain a short FREE review of your website contact bob.francis@sgba.co.uk

Notes

We have used a number of examples of ideas and links to companies in this article. No recommendation is expressed or implied by the use of a company's name or a reference to their website.

No guarantees are offered and the author takes no responsibility for disappointing performance in terms of search engine positioning by using any or all of the techniques described in this paper.

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